

The Olmec Paintings of Oxtotitlan Cave, Guerrero, Mexico

David C. Grove

DUMBARTON OAKS STUDIES IN PRE-COLUMBIAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY | 6



Frontispiece Mural 1. Human figure seated upon an Olmèc jaguar-monster face. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

THE OLMEC PAINTINGS
OF OXTOTITLAN CAVE,
GUERRERO, MEXICO

DAVID C. GROVE

State University of New York at Binghamton

With photographs and drawings by the author
and renderings by Felipe Dávalos

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David C. Grove
State University of New York
Binghamton, New York

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INTRODUCTION

OLMEC CULTURE, which flourished in the tropical lowlands of Mexico's Gulf coast (Fig. 1) between 1200 and 600 B.C. (Coe *et al.* 1967; Berger, Graham, and Heizer 1967) is today credited with developing Mesoamerica's first civilization and first great art style. As is the case in much of Mesoamerican archaeology, Olmec culture is best known for its art. This art was an integral part of Olmec religion, and thus should manifest in its iconography at least some of the religious and cultural beliefs of the Olmec. However, until recently, there have been few investigations along these lines. Olmec art has generally been known in three different forms: a) monumental stone carvings, including stelae, altars, colossal heads, and occasional human figures sculpted in the round; b) small, "portable" stone objects of fine workmanship, including figurines and anthropomorphic axes ("hachas"), usually in jade, jadeite, or serpentine; and c) various ceramic forms including white-slipped, hollow, "baby-face" figures, excised blackware bowls, etc. To this list of important Olmec art forms we may now add a fourth category, Olmec painted art. The addition of this new category also expands the geographical distribution of large Olmec art, for Olmec paintings are only known to occur in the Mexican state of Guerrero, a mountainous region on Mexico's Pacific coast.

A basic characteristic of Olmec art, and the trait for which it is best known, is the "baby-face" with the

snarling or drooping jaguarlike mouth which is exhibited by many human figures in Olmec art. Because of this characteristic, many of these figures have been referred to in the literature as "were-jaguars." Several explanations have been presented to account

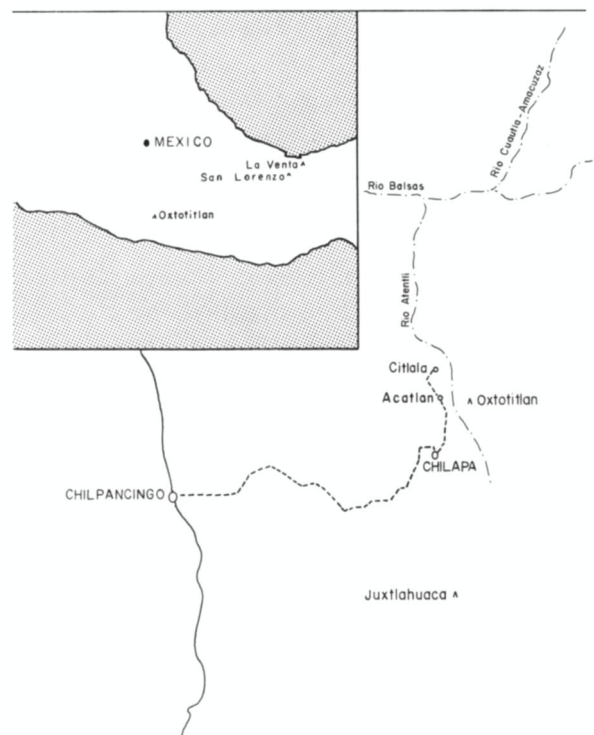


Fig. 1 The area of Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca caves, Guerrero, Mexico. Inset shows the location of the major Gulf coast Olmec sites.

for this unique Olmec motif. At least two stone carvings from the Gulf coast Olmec heartland appear to be Olmec representations of a jaguar having sexual intercourse with a woman (Stirling 1955: 8, 19–20, Pls. 2, 25, 26a). Both Matthew Stirling (1955:19–20) and Michael Coe (1965a: 14) have suggested that this may have represented the mythological creation of were-jaguar individuals (the “jaguar’s children”). Miguel Covarrubias saw a connection between the were-jaguar face and later rain-god motifs (Covarrubias 1946: 166–8, Pl. 4; 1957: 59–63, Fig. 22). Peter Furst (1968) has recently postulated that this motif represents a shamanistic transformation from human to were-jaguar. As evidence he cites ethnographic data from tropical forest groups in South America and compares the content of their transformation myths to iconographic characteristics of certain Olmec were-jaguar objects.

Olmec art is of course not limited to the were-jaguar, and other characteristics abound. These include various fang motifs, flame eyebrows, the step motif, the St. Andrew’s cross, and the jaguar-paw-wing-hand motif. In addition, a large number of unidentified, abstract, glyph-like motifs occur.¹ David Kelley (1966) has postulated an Olmec writing system based upon motifs of this latter type.

In depicting human figures, such as are found on stelae at La Venta, the Olmec indicated the head, arms, and legs in profile, with only the torso in frontal view. Most figures of this type wear elaborate headdresses or helmets, and several wear birdlike masks. Occasionally, bearded figures are shown.² Representations of serpents and jaguars also occur in several stylized forms.

Olmec painted art first came to scientific attention in 1966, when a group of paintings located deep within the Juxtlahuaca cave, Guerrero, were identi-

fied as being in the Olmec style (Gay 1967). Until that time the only large-scale Olmec art known for central Mexico was the group of bas-relief carvings at Chalcatzingo, Morelos, about 125 kilometers north of the Juxtlahuaca cave. In 1968 a second series of cave paintings was discovered and studied by the author.³ This new group, in the cave of Oxtotitlan, about thirty kilometers north of Juxtlahuaca, contains a greater number of paintings. Unlike the Juxtlahuaca paintings, those at Oxtotitlan occur in the mouth of the cave; unfortunately, they are therefore in a poorer state of preservation. Many are faded, hidden by mineral deposits, or covered by smoke from fires in the cave. Nonetheless, the majority are recognizable as part of the Olmec art style, and are a valuable aid to the interpretation of Olmec religious iconography.

THE SETTING OF OXTOTITLAN

THE SITE of Oxtotitlan is located on a hillside about two kilometers east of the village of Acatlan, and about twelve kilometers north of the town of Chilapa, Guerrero. The cave faces westward, overlooking the valley of the Río Atentli, and the village of Acatlan. The inhabitants of Acatlan, who retain the Nahuatl language today, refer to the cave by its Nahuatl name, Oxtotitlan (place of the caves). In Chilapa, the cave is known simply as “the cave of Acatlan.” Both Chilapa and Acatlan are located in valleys of the Sierra Madre del Sur, at an elevation of about 2,000 meters. Chilapa is reached by fifty-four kilometers of unpaved road which runs eastward from Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero; a second unpaved road joins Chilapa and Acatlan.

Very little is known at present about the prehistory of this region. Several archaeological sites, with mounds, are known near Acatlan and Chilapa, but no excavations have been conducted. Because of its re-

¹ An excellent discussion of Olmec style and symbolic motifs is presented by Coe (1965b). For illustrations, see Fig. 43 of Coe’s article.

² It is my belief that the stelae form, as well as bearded figures, belong to a later Olmec phase on the Gulf coast than the carvings at San Lorenzo, probably to La Venta Phases II–III.

³ The cave was brought to my attention by Sr. Juan DuBernard of Cuernavaca, Morelos, who reported it also to the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. With the permission of the Instituto, I made two studies of the paintings. Funds for the first study, in November 1968, were provided in part by the Graduate Research Office of the State University of New York-Binghamton.



Fig. 2 Oxtotitlan cave, Guerrero. The north grotto is visible at the lower left of the cliff face.

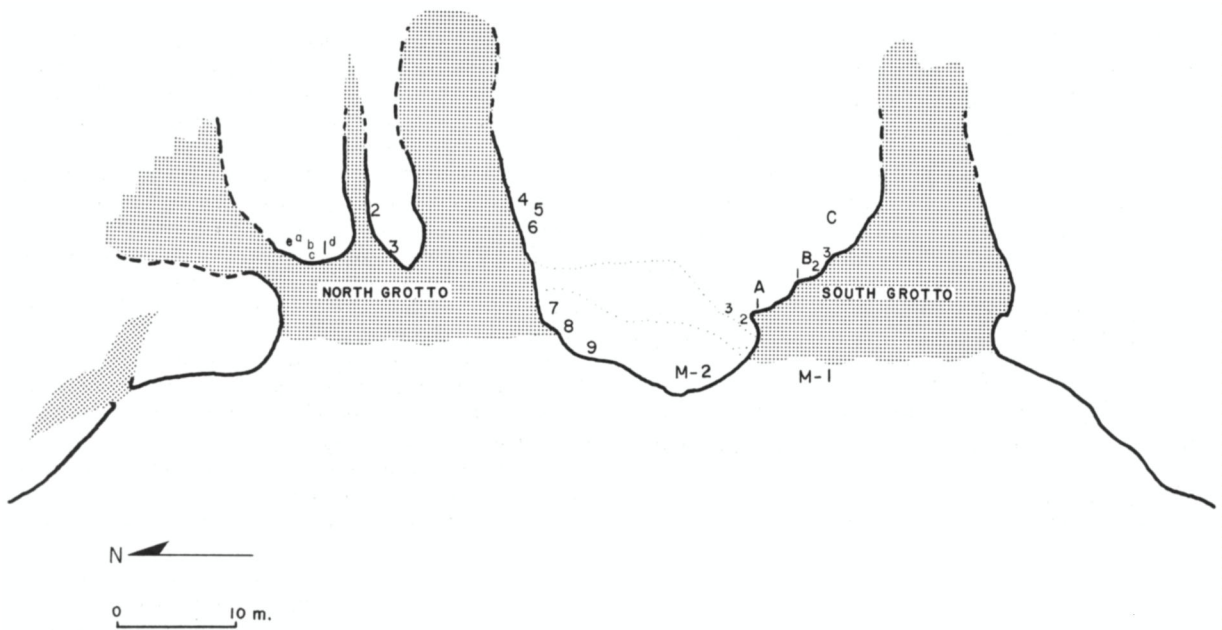


Fig. 3 Diagram showing location of the paintings in Oxtotitlan cave.

mote and mountainous terrain, Guerrero, one of Mexico's largest states, has received relatively little archaeological attention, although Guerrero is known to have had a complex Pre-Hispanic culture history. Covarrubias (1957: 76, 110), impressed by the large quantity of Olmec-style "portable" objects found in Guerrero, suggested that the area might have been the origin point of Olmec culture. During the Mesoamerican Classic Period, Guerrero showed areas of strong, independent cultural development (e.g., the Mezcala style of stone carving), and, at the same time, indications of outside influences. These influences come not only from the great central Mexican Classic urban center of Teotihuacan, but in addition "Maya" traits are reported from this region (Barrera 1936; Weitlaner 1948: 77, 81, 83), and there are even suggestions of possible Peruvian influence (Spinden 1911; Covarrubias 1957: 113, Fig. 50). During the latter part of the Post-Classic Period, and at the time of the Conquest, we know that the area of the Oxtotitlan cave was part of the province of Coixcatlalpan, and tributary to the Aztec Triple Alliance.

THE OXTOTITLAN PAINTINGS

THE PAINTINGS of Oxtotitlan occur on the sheer cliff face in front of the cave and in the two wide but relatively shallow grottos which open out onto the cliff face (Figs. 2 and 3). Three distinct types of paintings occur here. On the cliff face are two large polychrome paintings, covering areas of over nine square meters. To the north of these is the area of the cave we have called the north grotto; here the paintings occur in various groups, and are generally small and in black. To the south of the cliff paintings (and also below them) is the second shallow grotto, the south grotto. The paintings in this area appear in three large groups, and are simple designs, primarily in red.

In the description that follows, I feel it is important to discuss not only the stylistic aspects, but also the possible iconographic meaning of the paintings. Little at the moment is known about the iconography of Olmec art, and present interpretations are often in

conflict.⁴ The interpretations offered below are hypotheses based upon the available data. Much of this is tenuous, as it is founded on comparisons to Post-Classic Period (ca. 900–1500 A.D.) Mesoamerican iconography.⁵ However, it becomes increasingly clear as one works with Olmec art and iconography, that many aspects of the religions of later Mesoamerican cultures have their roots in Olmec religion.

CENTRAL GROUP PAINTINGS

The most spectacular of the Oxtotitlan paintings actually occur on the cliff face in front of the cave. While at one time they must have presented an impressive sight, today only one of the two is readily distinguishable. The technique used in creating these large, multicolored paintings is unknown, although they were probably made using mineral pigments in an oil base.⁶

Mural 1 (Frontispiece and Fig. 4)

This large polychrome mural⁷ measures 3.8 meters in width and 2.5 meters in height.⁸ It is located about ten meters above the base of the cliff, over the mouth of the south grotto, and its execution must have pre-

⁴ Bernal (1969: 103) remarks, for example, that "Mesoamerican gods had not come into being among the Olmecs," while Coe (1968a: 111–15) feels he has identified Olmec deities which were later to become important Classic and Post-Classic Period gods.

⁵ In a previous article (Grove 1968a: 486) I urged caution in the use of Post-Classic myths and iconography to interpret Olmec religion. We must not conclude a one-to-one relationship for similarities we find, for cultural concepts do not remain static through time. Nevertheless, with caution, Post-Classic data provide a starting point for the creation and/or testing of hypotheses.

⁶ Villagra (1959) has analyzed pigments from a number of Pre-Hispanic Mexican murals, and states that they have mineral pigments. Chia seed or animal fat may have provided the oil, although a resin base is also possible.

⁷ The term "mural" usually refers to paintings on man-made walls. It is used in this case to stress the uniqueness of the polychrome paintings and to aid in the numerical classification.

⁸ Because this painting is difficult to reach, the original dimensions published (Grove 1968c; 1969) were based upon an estimate and were too small. The dimensions given here are actual measurements made in April 1969.

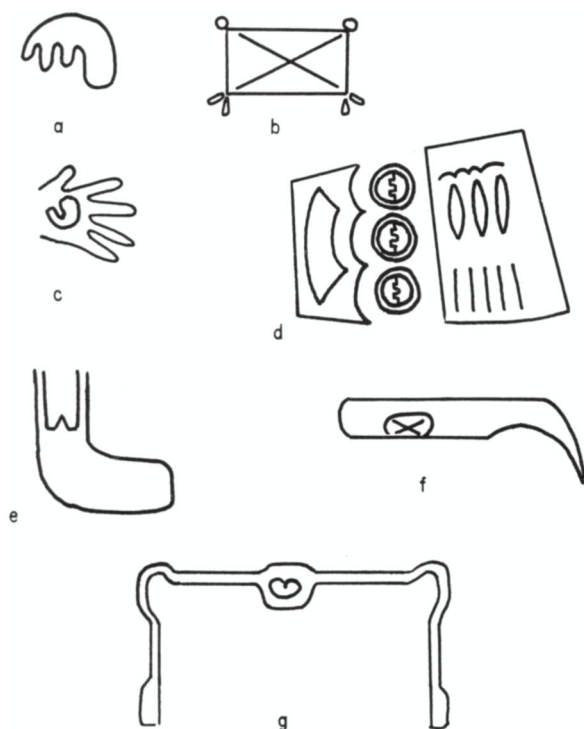


Fig. 4 Individual motifs from Mural 1.

sented a difficult task to the original artists. The painting represents a human figure seated upon the head of a jaguar-monster. The figure's pose is quite unlike that depicted in any other large-scale Olmec art known at present and is more characteristic of poses shown in Late Classic Maya art. This relaxed pose is known however in the small, finely made Olmec stone and clay figurines.⁹ The left arm of the seated person is raised, while the right arm extends diagonally toward the right knee. The right leg dangles over the face of the jaguar-monster. Unlike Maya murals, the body is not outlined in black. Body color is red-brown, while dress and ornamentation are red, various shades of blue-green, and ocher.

The seated figure wears an elaborate headdress and bird mask. The mask is more naturalistic and much larger than the bird masks normally shown in Olmec art. In this case the mask is worn above, rather than

covering, the face. Birds are infrequent in Olmec art; those that are depicted are generally raptorial birds such as eagles, owls, and parrots. The bird represented in this mask is undoubtedly an owl, with very large eyes and feathered "horns." Both horned owls and screech owls exhibit such horns. The *moan* bird, a screech owl,¹⁰ is frequently portrayed in Maya glyphs, and perhaps the owl on the mask is equivalent to an Olmec *moan*. The eye of the owl is represented by a wide green circle surrounding a smaller circular yellow concavity. The depth and form of this inner concavity indicate that it is man-made, and suggest it once held an object such as a piece of jade or a polished magnetite mirror.¹¹

The headdress, which is part of the owl mask, is primarily green.¹² In its center is a reddish motif (Fig. 4a) which also appears on an Olmec headdress at Chalcatzingo (Relief II; Grove 1968a: Fig. 3) and on a stone duck vessel from San Lorenzo (Monument 9; Stirling 1955: Pls. 17b and 18). This motif is quite probably a water symbol.¹³ At the top and rear of the headdress are small groups of three leaf-shaped elements. These also occur on head ornaments in Chalcatzingo Reliefs II and IV (Grove 1968a: Figs. 3 and 5). Although they may simply represent tufts of feathers, they appear to have had a more important iconographic significance. A long blue-green plume hangs from the rear of the headdress; a nearly identical plume motif appears in a similar context in Chalcatzingo Relief I (Grove 1968a: Fig. 1).

The profile human face is shown with several ornaments. At the nose is a circular green element, an ornament also appearing with figures on La Venta Stela 3 (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959; Figs. 67 and 68; Pl. 55). The figure also has a turquoise-colored

¹⁰ Thompson (1960: 114) identifies the *moan* bird as a screech owl, but also discusses other possibilities.

¹¹ Franco (personal communication) has noted that the yellow in the concavity is similar in color to Pre-Hispanic adhesives.

¹² The headdress appears to be taller than it is represented in the rendering, with added elements at the top.

¹³ Rands (1965: 320) has also suggested that the motif on the San Lorenzo duck vessel is water.

⁹ For example, see Coe 1965a: Figs. 184a, 185, 190, 194-9.

earspool with a hanging pendant. The body is adorned with ornaments (probably jade). A blue-green rectangular pectoral with a St. Andrew's cross motif hangs on the chest of the figure. Jade beads are attached to the corners of the pectoral (Fig. 4b). Nearly identical pectorals appear on seated Olmec statues from La Venta and Chalcatzingo (Heizer 1968: Fig. 12; Guzman 1934: Fig. 12). Jade ornaments also occur along the figure's arms, on the back of the hands, on the legs and ankles, and as small plaques atop each foot.¹⁴

It is apparent that the owl headdress continues down to form a feathered cloak which covers the figure's back and hangs from his arms. Feathers of ocher, red, and blue-green occur beneath his arms and along the left side of his torso; many of the ocher-colored feathers have pale tips. Below his left arm is a motif which is repeated in a much larger form to his left (Fig. 4d). Included in this interesting motif are three circles containing "step" elements. The step motif occurs frequently in various forms in Olmec art.¹⁵ In addition to the feathered cloak, the seated personage wears a blue-green belt and loincloth, and a red fringed skirt decorated with light designs. The fringe of the skirt has a notched element, possibly the fang motif. The major design on the skirt occurs on both the right and left sides; this is an outline of a hand with a scroll element in the palm. The hand-scroll motif is found also on Olmec roller stamps and on flat stamps from other culture periods (e.g., Enciso 1953: 134-IV). The characteristic Olmec motif found on ceramics, the jaguar paw-hand-wing, also incorporates a scroll element in the palm (Fig. 4c).¹⁶ In Mesoamerican iconography the scroll is a common element symbolizing water (Rands 1955: 285-98;

Thompson 1960: 114) and the hand-scroll motif may therefore be related to water. The hand-scroll motif also shows similarities to the sectioned conch motif associated with Quetzalcoatl in later Mesoamerican iconographic traditions.

The jaguar-monster head, the second major portion of Mural 1, is nearly identical to jaguar-monster faces carved upon the large stone altars at Olmec sites on the Gulf coast. The person in the painting may therefore be seated upon an altar. Stirling (1943:54) noted that La Venta Altar 4 had an area on its flat top "giving the impression of a jaguar skin thrown across." In the mural, the shape of the eyes of the jaguar monster is similar to those of jaguar-monsters on the Gulf coast carvings.¹⁷ The pupil of each eye is represented by a dark blue-green oval containing a St. Andrew's cross. This same motif appears on the Juxtlaahuaca serpent (Figs. 35 and 36) and on the jaguar-monster cave representation of Chalcatzingo Relief I (Grove 1968a: Fig. 1; Coe 1965a: Figs. 10 and 11a). A portion of the right eye of the Oxtotitlan jaguar-monster is covered by the dangling right leg of the seated personage. The creature's upper jaw or lip (Fig. 4g) is again similar in shape to Gulf coast jaguar-monsters, such as Altar 1 at La Venta (Stirling 1943: Pl. 36) and the incised face on the belt of Monument 12 (Drucker 1952: Fig. 53b). The Oxtotitlan jaguar-monster lacks the typical nose depicted in other jaguar-monster representations. In this case, the nose, indicated by a heart-shaped element, occurs within the jaw motif. Two large curving fangs protrude below the jaw. Barely visible within the left fang (Fig. 4e) is a small, notched rectangle, another Olmec fang motif. Between the fangs is a horizontal area of shaded green crossed by a vertical and two horizontal bands of ocher and white. This design shows similarities to a carved band above and to the right of the jaguar-monster head on La Venta Altar 4 (Stirling 1943: Pl. 37a).

Several features on this large painting assist us in determining its probable iconographic significance.

¹⁴ The closest similarity to the feet plaques is the footwear worn by the figure on Stela 3 at La Venta (Drucker 1952: Fig. 61; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: Figs. 67 and 68).

¹⁵ For example, on the skirt of the jadeite figure now in the Puebla museum (Covarrubias 1946: Pl. 1), and the large buried masks at La Venta (Drucker 1952: Figs. 20 and 24, Pl. 10; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: Fig. 29, Pls. 15 and 16).

¹⁶ For further examples, see Coe 1965a: Figs. 8, 26, 27, 29, 36, 36a.

¹⁷ For example, Altar 1 and Monument 6, La Venta (Stirling 1943: Pls. 36 and 47b) and San Lorenzo Monument 41 (Coe 1967: Foto 5).

The color of a great portion of the jaguar-monster face and the attire worn by the seated figure is green, a color which in later Mesoamerican iconography was representative of water and jade. J. Eric Thompson (1960: 49, 114, 275, 292) has discussed the relationship of the Maya *moan* bird and rain, and, as noted above, the *moan* was an owl. Owl masks in Teotihuacan art are also commonly associated with rain gods, rain, and water (Armillas 1945; Miller 1967; Noguera 1925). Thus, it is likely that a similar owl-rain relationship exists for this painting.¹⁸ The motif on the headdress, which I have suggested is a water motif, strengthens this identification.

Jaguar-monster faces appearing on altars at Gulf coast Olmec sites normally have a hollowed-out niche in the area below the jaw.¹⁹ Several of the niches have seated figures in them, some holding were-jaguar babies (Stirling 1943: Pls. 36-40; 1955: Pl. 21b). These niches, while probably representing the jaguar-monster's mouth, also apparently represent caves. The jaguar-monster mouth and cave association is particularly evident in the Chalcatzingo bas-reliefs. Relief IX (Grove 1968a: Fig. 7) was apparently carved so that the jaguar-monster's mouth formed the opening of an actual cave. A similar association is shown in Relief I (1968a: 486-7, Fig. 1), with a human figure seated in a jaguar-monster mouth. Post-Classic central Mexican codices frequently portray caves as earth-monster mouths (e.g., Peñafiel 1885: 158-9). It is important to note therefore that Mural 1, with the jaguar-monster face, is located above the cave mouth of Oxtotitlan's south grotto. This context will be commented upon later. The general theme of Mural 1 appears to be rain, water, and fertility. The Chalcatzingo reliefs, mentioned above, which illustrate the jaguar-monster and cave association also contain other motifs such as plants, rain clouds, etc., which

leave no doubt about their connection with agricultural fertility. Altar 4 at La Venta also contains motifs suggesting a similar relationship (Stirling 1943: Pl. 37a).

Mural 2 (Fig. 5)

This was once probably the largest and most elaborate of the Oxtotitlan paintings, originally covering an area of about 4 by 3 meters. Because of its location on the cliff, the painting has been almost completely destroyed by nature, and the polychrome colors are now faded almost to obscurity and can be seen well only in the protected portions of the cliff. While many lines and features can be determined, large sections of



Fig. 5 Reconstruction of visible areas of Mural 2.

¹⁸ Since the religions of both the Classic Maya and Teotihuacan were strongly influenced by the Olmec, these later associations of owls and rain may have derived from the Olmec.

¹⁹ The use of these altars is unknown. They may have served as thrones and/or dedicatory monuments for rulers at these sites. This is discussed later in this paper.

the cliff rock are missing, and it is therefore difficult to determine the content of this mural. The area in the upper left portion of the painting seems to have shown a human face with an elongated eye; many fine linear elements appear in black around the eye. The only well-preserved part of this painting lies above this region; represented here are a small group of black and yellow feathers, remnants of what I believe were part of a headdress. Traces of blue-green, red, and ocher paint occur in the face area and below. However, few specific designs can be detected. Near the center of the painting is an area which unquestionably represents a jaguar or jaguar skin. A line indicating the back of the jaguar can be seen, while be-

low this is an ocher background containing flower-like designs representing jaguar spots.²⁰ These flowers consist of three broad semi-circular petals surrounding a red center. It is not possible to determine at the moment if the total scene in Mural 2 represented a human being wearing a jaguar skin, or a human being in association with a jaguar; both cases are known in Olmec paintings.²¹

²⁰ This flower-like motif is used to represent jaguar spots in the north grotto Painting 1-d, as well as in the art of Teotihuacan.

²¹ Juxtlahuaca Painting 1 shows a person wearing a jaguar-skin robe, while Oxtotitlan Painting 1-d in the north grotto depicts a person standing beside a jaguar.



Fig. 6 Area of Painting 1.

NORTH GROTTO PAINTINGS

A number of paintings occur in this area of the cave. They are generally small in size and with one exception (Painting 2) are all painted in black, with occasional traces of red. The walls of the grotto are stained with mineral deposits and carbon from fires, partially obscuring many of the paintings. Areas of faint paint-

ing, indecipherable in their present state, occur on the grotto's walls and ceiling.

Painting 1 (Fig. 6)

The term Painting 1 is used to refer to a group of paintings in the northern portion of this grotto. They are clustered together and may represent a purposeful grouping; therefore they are discussed as a single painting which is subdivided alphabetically.

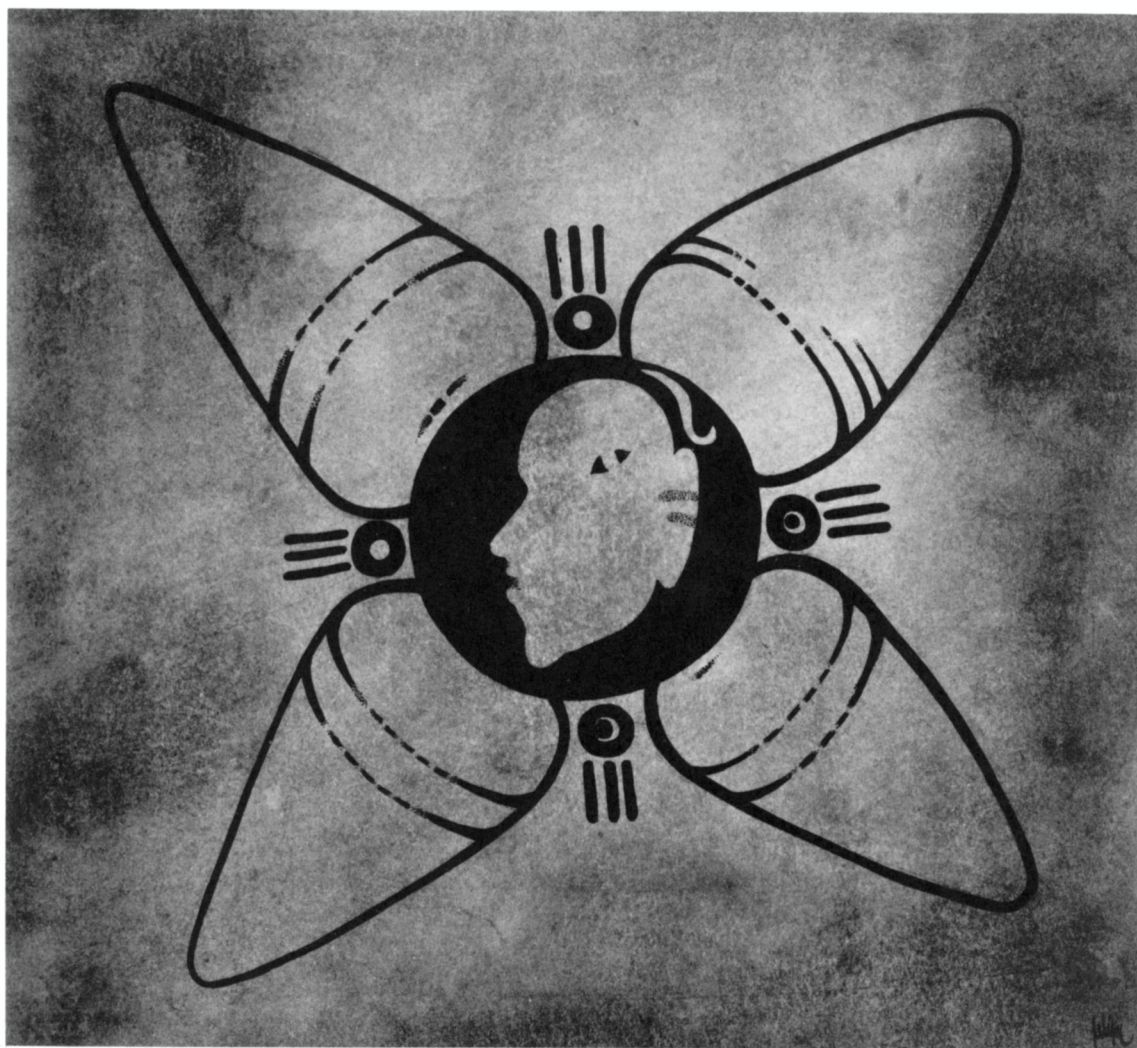


Fig. 7 Painting 1-a. "Flower" with profile of human face in its center. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.



Fig. 8 Painting 1-a.

1-a, 1-e (Figs. 7-10). This is a grouping of two small paintings. Felipe Dávalos feels that their stylistic traits indicate that they were painted by the same artist at the same time. Painting 1-a is a simple outline of what appears to be a flower, composed of a circular central area, in black, from which four long petals radiate. Silhouetted within the circular center is a profile of a human face. Between each flower petal is a small circular element with three short, parallel lines. This motif may represent jade beads, or a stylized jaguar-paw motif like that in Painting 1-d, below. Similar design elements occur along the base of the buried jaguar-mask pavements at La Venta (Drucker 1952: Fig. 20, Pl. 10; Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: Fig. 29, Pls. 14-17). The entire flower resembles the Maya *kin* glyph, which Thompson (1960: 142) identifies as meaning "day" or "sun," and which he suggests is a representation of a four-petaled plumeria

flower, whereas he equates a five-petaled plumeria flower with the moon. This interpretation is based upon Post-Classic data.

Painting 1-e occurs to the left and slightly below 1-a. It was not seen until our second study of the paintings; therefore, its numeration is out of sequence. It is unique for it is a completely naturalistic representation of an owl. Parts of the body of the bird are difficult to discern, but its major form and features are quite clear. Its body is shown in profile, while the head is in fullface view. The head is cocked at a slight angle.²² Like the owl in Mural 1, this owl has two feathered "horns." As previously indicated, there is an iconographic relationship in Maya and Teotihuacan art between owls and rain; it is uncertain whether such a relationship exists in this particular painting.

²² The head is actually slightly more tilted than is shown in the rendering.

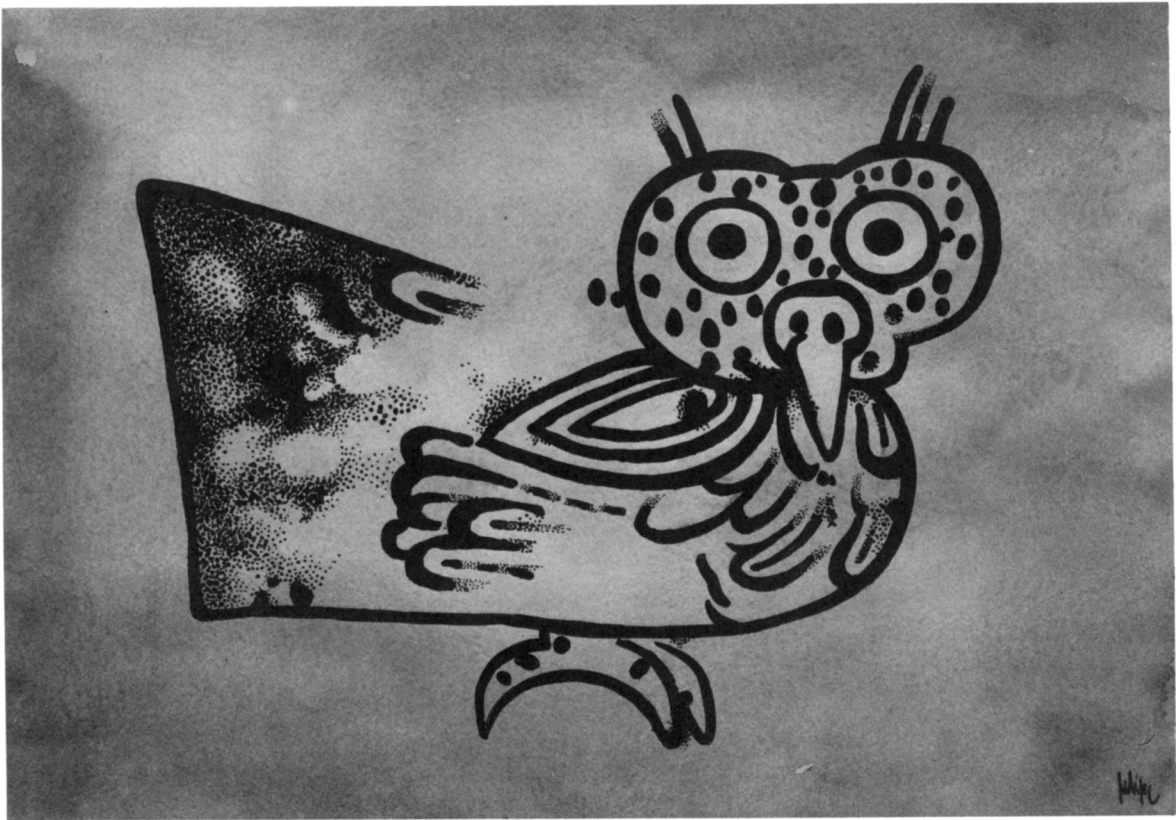


Fig. 9 Painting 1-e. Owl.
Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

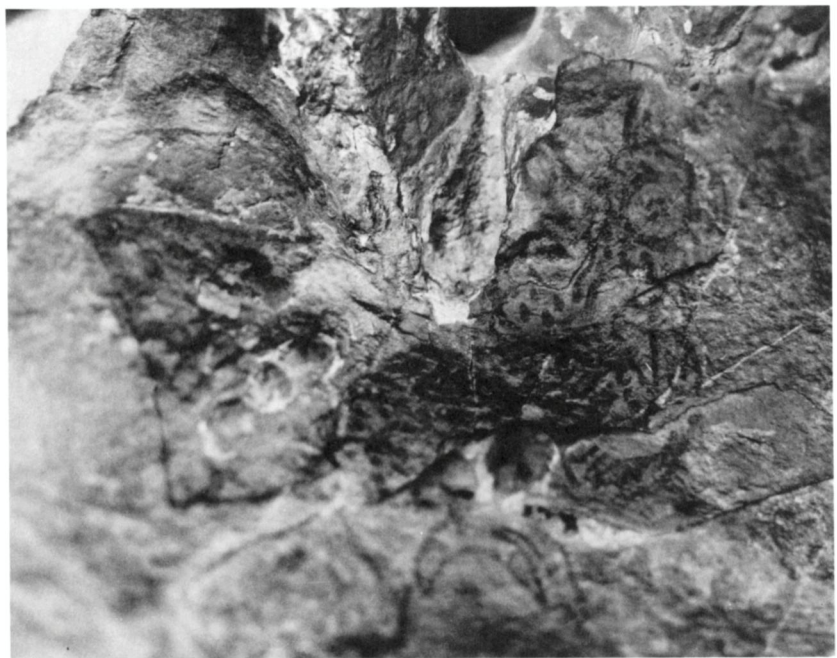
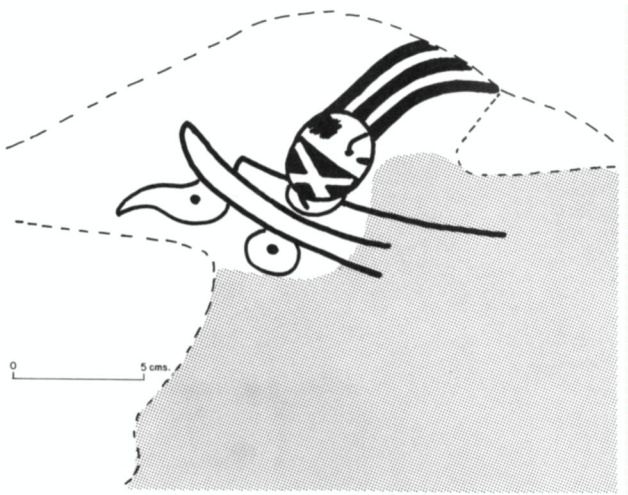


Fig. 10 Painting 1-e.

1-b (Fig. 11). A large portion of this painting is missing, making identification difficult. The few remaining fragments suggest a stylized reptilian or jaguar face. The main motif is an oval encompassing a St. Andrew's cross. Three thick black lines curve from the top of the oval. While these may represent a stylized jaguar-paw motif such as occurs in Painting 1-d, it is more likely that they depict a plumed eyebrow motif. The St. Andrew's cross occasionally occurs with this kind of motif above the eye (e.g., the jaguars in Chalcatzingo Relief IV; Grove 1968a: Fig. 5). Below the oval is an element which may represent an eye and another which may represent a fang.

1-c (Fig. 12). A thin calcium carbonate deposit covers this painting, making portions difficult to distinguish. It represents a reptilian creature which appears to combine traits of both the *cipactli* and the feathered serpent. Only the head area, with its multi-fanged mouth and extended bifid tongue can be seen easily. The entire composition of this creature is nearly identical to one carved on Relief V at Chalcatzingo (Grove 1968a: Fig. 6). Both of these creatures exhibit wing-like areas behind their heads, a trait Coe (1968a: 92, 114; personal communication) feels identifies them as

Fig. 11 Tentative reconstruction of visible portion of Painting 1-b.



early feathered serpents.²³ Among the Maya, serpents and dragon-like creatures such as the *Chicchan* and

²³ This creature may have "X" motifs on the body, as does that at Chalcatzingo: this motif is also considered by Coe to be a characteristic of early feathered serpents.

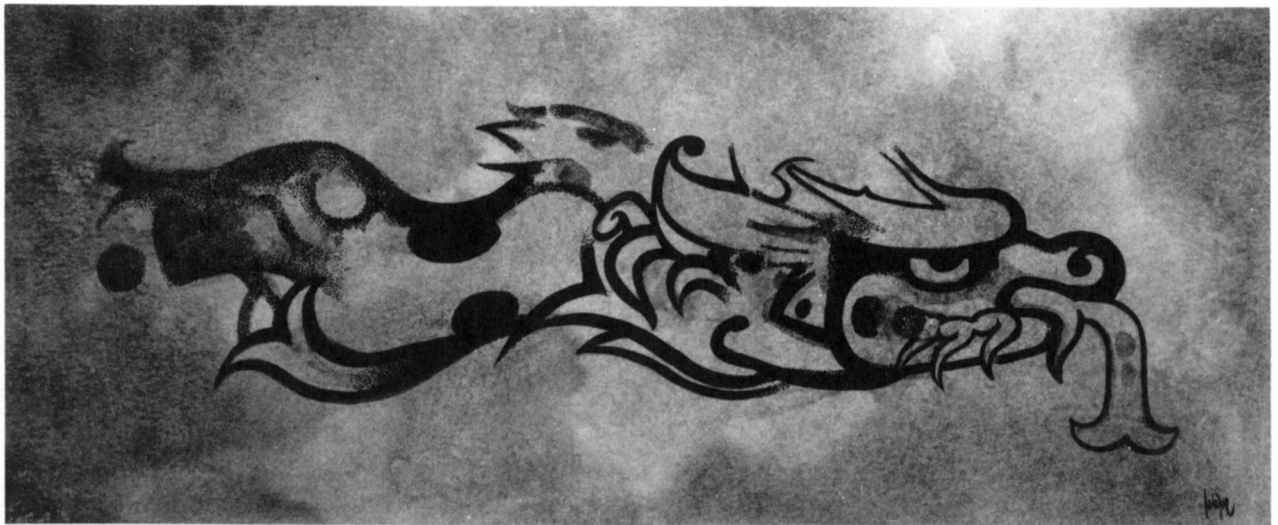


Fig. 12 Painting 1-c. Reptilian creature. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

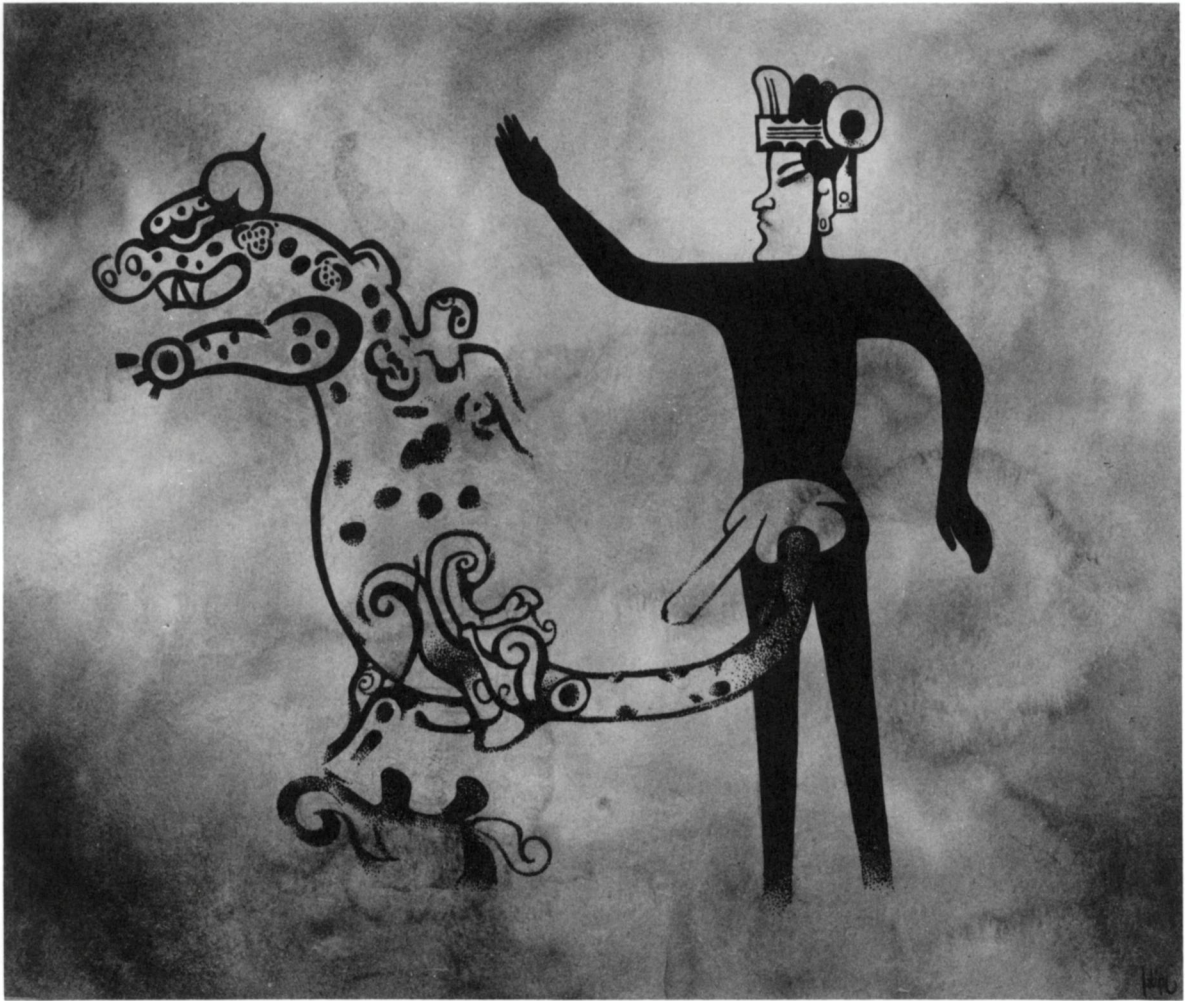


Fig. 13 Painting 1-d. Standing man and jaguar. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

Itzamná were often associated with rain and crop fertility (e.g., Thompson 1960:11). It is possible that this Oxtotitlan creature has a similar significance.

1-d (Fig. 13). The representation of a human figure standing behind a jaguar, with an apparent sexual connection between the two, makes this painting one of the most important Olmec paintings known. The painting covers an area of about 1.5 by 1.5 meters. The standing person is painted completely in black, with the exception of his face, simple headdress, and pubic area. While the figure is frontal, the head faces

toward the jaguar (which faces to its right). The person's right arm is raised toward the jaguar's head, while his left arm extends back and downward. The human face is quite Olmec, with a slightly drooping mouth and an eye that is an elongated slit. The headdress is not as elaborate as those normally portrayed in Olmec art; this may indicate a difference in status or social group.

The jaguar, which is difficult to see clearly except under proper conditions, appears in a semi-erect position, its right hind leg resting upon an obscure, scroll-

like object,²⁴ while its highly stylized left foreleg extends frontward. This foreleg is shortened and utilizes a circle-and-line motif to represent the paw and claws.²⁵ The entire jaguar is shown in profile, but, curiously, the artist made an attempt to depict the head of the jaguar in a half-turned position. This was only partially accomplished, as the ear and eye are indicated in profile, but the nose appears turned toward the viewer; both nostrils are shown. The animal's mouth is open and snarling. Teeth are indicated and traces of red paint occur in the mouth area. The lower jaw is difficult to discern. The body of the jaguar is covered with a series of flower-like spot motifs, as well as some scrolls. The spot motif is composed of three arcs enclosing an area containing four dots. There are elaborate scroll motifs at the lower part of the animal.

This painting is one of the rare occurrences in Olmec art where human figures and jaguars are depicted together. None of the reported reliefs from La Venta depicts such an association. Chalcatzingo Relief IV shows human figures lying prostrate beneath attacking jaguars (Grove 1968a: Fig. 5). As noted earlier, two Gulf coast sites have yielded carvings in the round, both badly defaced, which apparently show jaguars having sexual intercourse with women (Monument 1, Río Chiquito, and Monument 3, Potrero Nuevo; Stirling 1955: 8, 19–20, Pls. 2, 25, 26a). Generally, however, Olmec art is free of any hint of the sex of the figures portrayed, or of any sexual acts. It is therefore important to note that Painting 1-d appears to imply a sexual connection between a jaguar and a human. The jaguar's tail passes to the pubic area of the person; in addition, the human phallus extends to the rear area of the jaguar.²⁶ A sexual union between the two is undoubtedly illustrated.

²⁴ The left hind leg is obscure, but there are indications that it was depicted as a jointed limb coming from the tail area. This is not shown in the rendering. There are also traces of a line showing the lower back region.

²⁵ This motif is similar to the circle-and-line motif between the petals of the flower in Painting 1-a, offering another possible identification of that element.

²⁶ This area of the painting is difficult to distinguish, and may have been purposely defaced in Pre-Hispanic times.

The interpretation of this scene is extremely difficult. While the jaguar (or jaguar-monster) was associated with concepts of rain and fertility, we know that contact-period cultures related the jaguar to the underworld, the heart of mountains, etc. In addition, ruling groups in the Maya area identified themselves with the jaguar. This will be discussed more fully in a later section.

Unidentifiable. Along the base of the Group 1 paintings are indistinct painted areas of black and red. No particular design could be discerned, but they appear to surround a wide concavity or niche in the rock and may have represented another jaguar-monster face.²⁷

Painting 2

In a small passageway leading from the center of the north grotto are two simple paintings, stylistically unlike the others in this part of Oxtotitlan. They consist of two outlines of small right hands, in red paint. Actual human hands were placed against the wall and outlined in paint. They appear to be the hands of two different individuals. Outlines such as these have been found throughout the world and are not diagnostic of any particular culture group.

Painting 3 (Figs. 14 and 15)

On the ceiling of the grotto there was a small painting, about 20 centimeters in length, depicting a creature with reptilian, mammalian, and avian characteristics. It has a long, pointed bill or snout, a set of teeth with one slightly extended fang, a long rounded (mammalian) tongue, and scroll elements forming the back of the head. The creature shows similarities to a representation on a Teotihuacan vessel which Laurette Séjourné (1959: Fig. 138) identifies with Quetzalcoatl (the feathered-serpent god). Below the head of this creature are forms which appear to repre-

²⁷ A small hole connects the back of the niche to another grotto (without paintings). It is tempting to suggest this is a "talk hole," a phenomenon found in colonial Yucatan, when the cult of the talking cross was popular. Altar 1 at La Venta (Stirling 1943: 53) has a similar hole; any such identification is however extremely tenuous.



Fig. 14 Painting 3. A *cipactli*-type creature. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.



Fig. 15 Painting 3.

sent a collar,²⁸ composed of three large joined circles. From the creature's snout there appears a bulb-like projection. Above the head are three circular elements whose position suggests a number glyph, signifying "3," or, taken with the circles below the head, "6." If in actuality these do represent a number glyph, this painting is the earliest number glyph yet known.

Painting 4 (Fig. 16)

On the south wall of this grotto are a series of small paintings, some naturalistic, others glyph-like. Paint-

²⁸ The rendering, which is based on a photograph, shows only one of the three circles. This painting was studied during our first trip in November 1968. Upon our return in March 1969, it had been removed. The particular piece of rock holding this painting was partially loose, but could only have been removed deliberately.

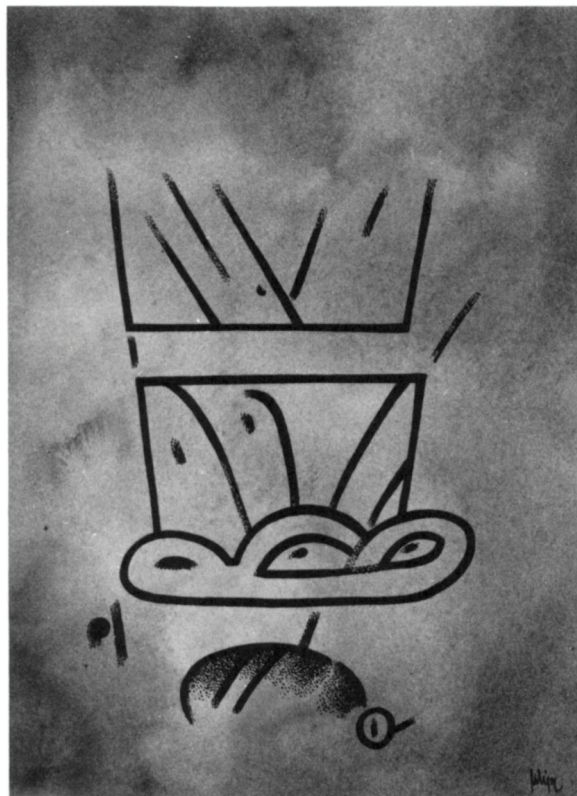


Fig. 16 Painting 4. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

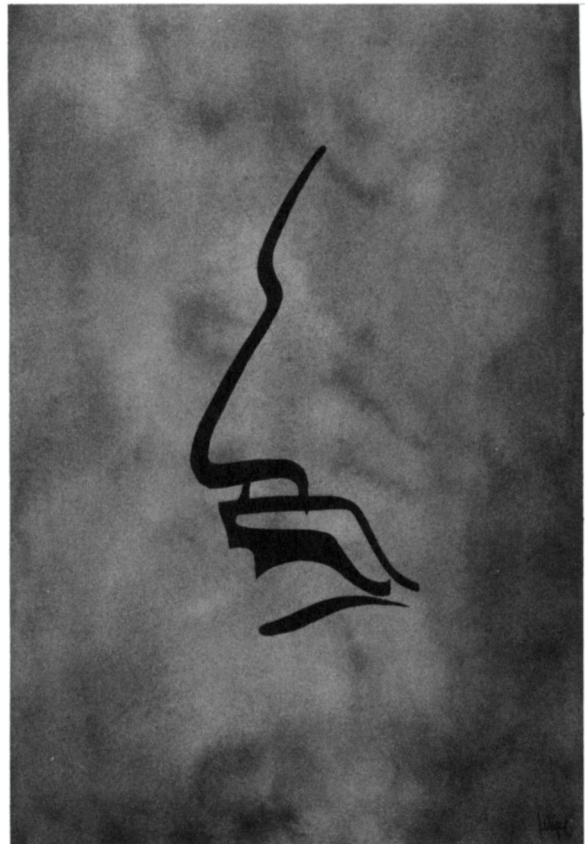


Fig. 17 Painting 5. Olmec face in profile. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

ing 4 is of this latter type. It is an obscure painting, whose details are difficult to make out. We can offer no identification at present.

Painting 5 (Fig. 17)

This small painting, about 10 centimeters in height, is located high on the wall, between Paintings 4 and 6. A simple line drawing of an Olmec baby-face, it is one of the purest examples of Olmec art at the cave. Only the forehead, nose, and full, baby-face mouth are shown. It is nearly identical to the face in Painting 7 nearby, and may have served as a preliminary sketch or prototype for it.

Painting 6 (Fig. 18)

This painting, about 36 centimeters in height, appears to be a glyphic motif, but on close examination it has anthropomorphic characteristics, including a stylized face with nearly rectangular eyes, a possible fanged mouth, and arms. The eyes (if they actually represent eyes) are of a type rare in Olmec art, but are similar to Classic Period Venus symbols (Séjourné 1959: Fig. 105A; Thompson 1960: Fig. 22).²⁹ The central portion of the figure is reminiscent of a bat with folded wings; however, such an identification is dubious. It could also be hypothesized that the large eyes connect this painting with a rain deity, an equally tenuous identification.

Painting 7 (Figs. 19 and 20)

Another characteristically Olmec baby-face is represented in this small painting, about 20 centimeters high, located far up the south wall of the cave near the mouth of the north grotto. An Olmec head wearing a simple helmet and a serpent mask over the mouth area is shown in profile. The eye is heavily outlined; above the eye is a scroll eyebrow. The baby-face mouth is depicted with the characteristic were-jaguar trait of toothless gums. The serpent mask, with its three fangs, is unusual, for it is worn only over the jaw area, rather than covering the entire face.

Ten centimeters in front of the mouth is a small scroll element, possibly the earliest known example of a speech glyph.³⁰ After this, the oldest speech glyphs occur in Teotihuacan murals at Tepantitla, Zacuala, the Temple of Agriculture, etc. (e.g., Kubler 1967: Figs. 1–4, 17, 45–6; Séjourné 1959: Figs. 2, 12, 29). In the “Paradise” mural at Tepantitla, the scrolls illustrated issue not only from mouths, but on at least one occasion from a human hand (e.g., Kubler 1967: Fig. 3). In nearly all instances on Teotihuacan murals, the often elaborated speech scrolls occur in scenes re-

lating to water and fertility. As mentioned above, Robert Rands (1955: 285–98) and Thompson (1960: 114) have discussed the connection between scroll motifs and water. Thus the scroll in Painting 7 at Ox-totitlan may also represent water or a prayer or peti-

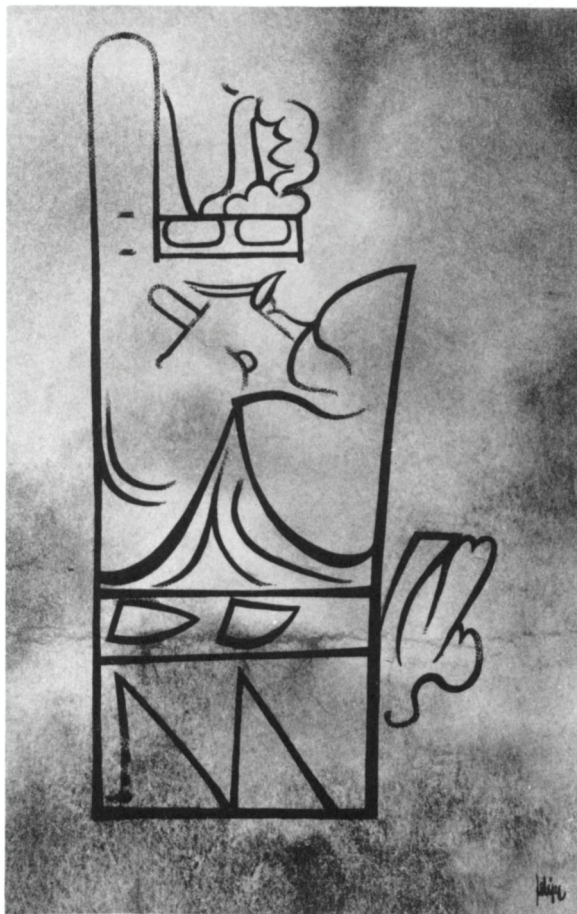


Fig. 18 Painting 6. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

tion for water. The fact that the scroll in Painting 7 curves up, while those at Teotihuacan generally curl down, appears unimportant in view of the time gap separating these paintings. Our identification, in any case, is only hypothetical and quite tenuous.

²⁹ Thompson (1960: 77, 218, 299) mentions a connection in Maya art between Venus and a god with jaguar characteristics.

³⁰ This scroll element may have a simpler shape than is shown in the rendering.



Fig. 19 Painting 7. Olmec face with serpent mask. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.



Fig. 20 Painting 7.

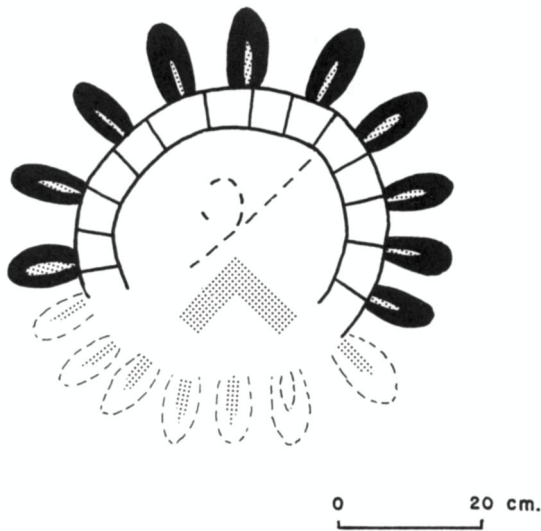


Fig. 21 Painting 8. Disk and feather motif.

Painting 8 (Fig. 21)

Located almost in the mouth of the north grotto, this painting is nearly hidden under mineral deposits, and is therefore hard to define today. Over 60 centimeters in diameter, it apparently represents a circular band divided into a series of rectangles. Spaced around the outer edge of the band are a series of black elements, apparently feathers, with red centers. In the lower portion of the painting, where the band is in-

distinct, these red areas are still visible, and help us to reconstruct the configuration of this somewhat distorted circular band. The overall motif of band and feathers is similar to the solar disk motif of Post-Classic central Mexico (e.g., Noriega 1959: 265). However, Monument C, Tres Zapotes, has its elaborate scrolls fringed with "feathers," indicating that this design appears in the Pre-Classic as well (Stirling 1943: Pls. 5, 17, and 18).

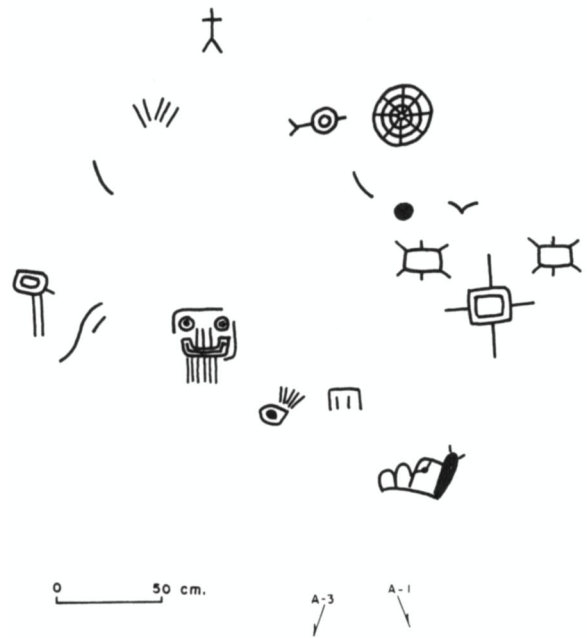


Fig. 23 Miscellaneous Area A paintings, south grotto.



Fig. 22 Painting 9. Broad red scroll-like elements, outlined in black.

Painting 9 (Fig. 22)

This painting, in the mouth of the north grotto, also occurs in an area of heavy mineralization. In addition, it is not completely protected from the forces of nature. It may be part of Painting 8, but this is difficult to ascertain because of its poor condition. It consists of a series of wide red scroll-like elements, heavily outlined in black. Until these can be placed in context with the adjacent paintings, their meaning cannot be determined.



Fig. 24 Area A paintings.

SOUTH GROTTO PAINTINGS

In striking contrast to the black paintings of the north grotto, the south grotto paintings are primarily simple linear and geometric designs in red. They occur in three area groupings and are discussed in that context below; however, they all appear to be contemporaneous. The designs of these paintings are so similar to other rock art throughout the world that only the more detailed and important of them will be discussed.

Area A (Figs. 23 and 24)

There are over fifteen small paintings in this group, most of which occur in or just below a shallow concavity high on the wall of the north side of the grotto. Most of these paintings are simple designs. Three are elaborate enough to merit further discussion, as they bear upon the possible stylistic dating of these paintings.

A-1 (Fig. 25). The villagers of Acatlan have labeled this painting "El Diablo," for they feel it represents the devil with his curly tail, and this is probably why several persons have purposely defaced the painting. In actuality, the painting appears to be a combination of glyphic motifs. At the top of the painting is a large hand-like element with seven "fingers." Below this is a series of curvilinear elements which include what appears to be a small "X" motif (a St. Andrew's cross?). Dávalos, when copying this painting, suggested that this motif was quite similar to highly stylized serpent faces occasionally occurring in Olmec art, with the "X" representing the serpent eye.³¹ Next is a motif which resembles a shield with a negative "X" (St. Andrew's cross?) design. Four leaf-shaped elements occur spaced around the outer edge of the "shield." Because the painting has been defaced, it is difficult to ascertain the exact form of each motif. At the base of the painting are two long



Fig. 25 Painting A-1. "El Diablo." Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

scrolls which issue from the shield-like motif directly above. This design is reminiscent of the glyph for "tepetl" ("mountain") in central Mexican codices.

A-2 (Fig. 26). A second red painting occurs to the left of A-1, but it is so badly defaced that it is nearly indistinguishable.³² It appears to represent a kneeling human figure. However, the facial features, head-dress elements, etc., cannot be determined today. The figure's position is similar to the kneeling "Olmec" figure from San Isidro Piedra Parada, Guatemala (Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 25, left).

³¹ Covarrubias (1957: Fig. 9) illustrates a variety of stylized motifs of this type.

³² This painting must have been defaced many years ago because present-day local villagers appear unaware of its existence.

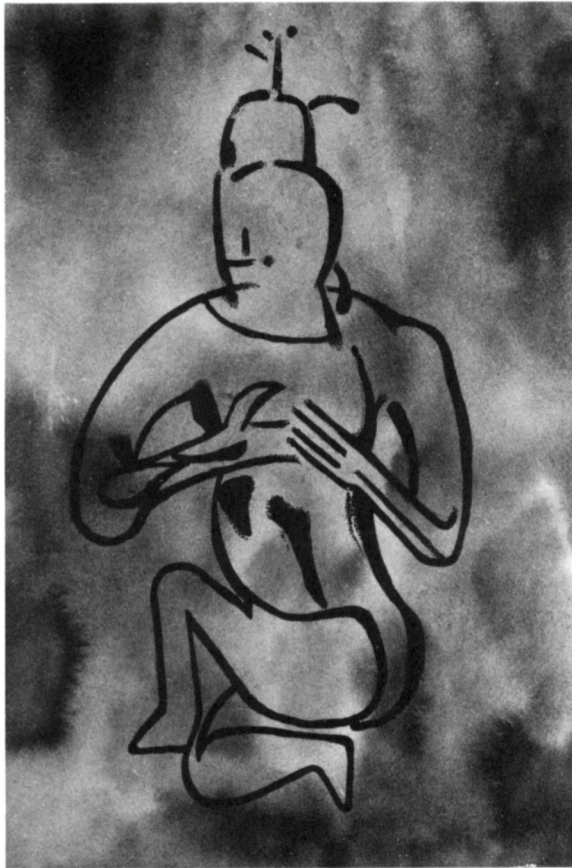
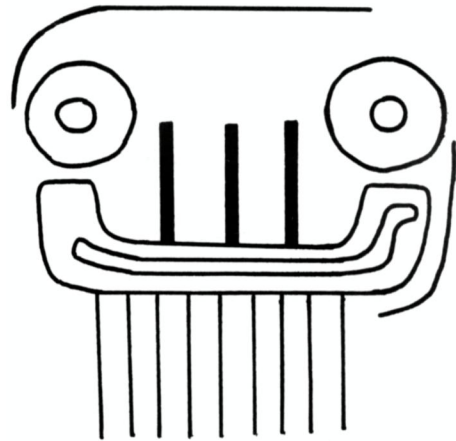


Fig. 26 Painting A-2. Kneeling human figure. Rendering by Felipe Dávalos.

A-3 (Figs. 23, 27, and 28). In the main body of the Area A paintings is a small, simple face which is easily identifiable as a rain-god ("Tlaloc") face, with wide goggle eyes, and linear elements extending both above and below the mouth. This is one of the few motifs in the south grotto whose iconographic significance is reasonably certain. This will be discussed further.

Area B (Figs. 29 and 30)

This group, just to the south of Group A, includes one small polychrome painting and one small black painting. These paintings differ somewhat in content from those of Area A. There are fewer individual



0 5 cm.

Fig. 27 Painting A-3. Rain-god face.



Fig. 28 Painting A-3. Rain-god face.

geometric motifs, and there is a complex series of red zigzag elements. In section B-I some traces of green paint occur in association with a simple but unidenti-

fiable design. Section B-2 is heavily mineralized but contains what seems to be a deliberate palimpsest (Fig. 29). Here, a naturalistic painting of a leaping deer, finely executed in black, has a series of red lines, almost forming a box over the black lines of the deer's head. Under the mineralized area to the left there appears to be a human figure. This scene suggests the evocation of hunting magic. To the right is a faded and mineralized area, section B-3 (Fig. 30), a series of zigzag and linear elements.

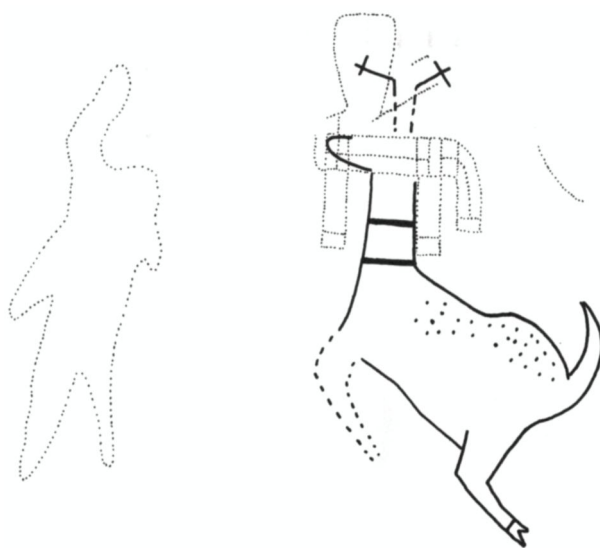


Fig. 29 Area B, section B-2. Leaping deer in black with superimposed paintings in red (dotted lines).

Area C (Fig. 31)

These paintings are again simple individual designs like those of Area A. They occur near the center of the grotto in crevices and upon stalactites near the ceiling, and are scattered over an area of about five meters.

Fig. 31 Area C paintings.

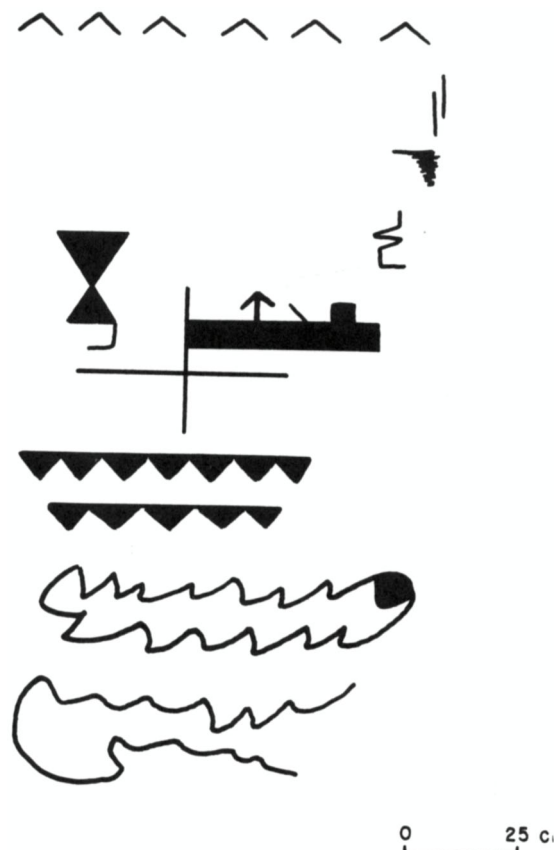
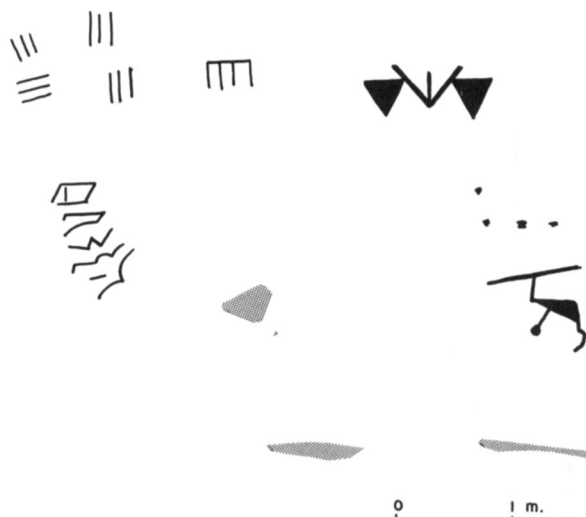


Fig. 30 Area B, section B-3.



TEXTILES

DURING our various investigations of Oxtotitlan, seven ancient textile fragments were discovered,³³ all of which are apparently Pre-Hispanic. Pre-Hispanic textile fragments are not unknown in Mexico, but are nevertheless quite rare. Several examples from Guerrero have been discussed by Irmgard Weitlaner Johnson (1967: 170-2). Recently, Johnson (1967) and José Luis Franco (1967) have published details of a nearly complete *huipilli* reported to have come from a cave near Chilapa, Guerrero. It was said to have been found in the cave "dentro de una olla, por 'buscadores de tesoros'" (Johnson 1967: 171).³⁴ The most elaborate of the textiles found at Oxtotitlan (Fig. 32) appears to be a fragment of a "cinturón," a waist sash or belt of a type still worn by indigenous groups in southern Mexico. The textile, apparently a combination of cotton and rabbit hairs, has edges that are tightly woven in a simple weave. The central area is constructed by two techniques, a simple weave and a brocade. The warp threads are both red and white, with only white warp threads in the central area. The majority of the weft threads are red. The brocaded design is a series of diamond patterns.

The other textile fragments are coarse, simple weaves using a vegetal fiber, probably maguey. No design motifs or color differences are visible (Fig. 33).

CERAMICS

CERAMIC SHERDS occur in only small quantities in and around the immediate area of the cave. Most of the sherds found are plainware, and not diagnostic of any particular culture period. The terraced hill, Cerro

³³ The textile fragments were apparently found somewhere in the north grotto by villagers from Acatlan who were "treasure hunting" or simply exploring the numerous crevices and holes in the irregular rock floor of this grotto; the fragments were then tossed aside onto the floor of the cave, where we found them. I found only one tiny fragment under the jumbled rock floor.

³⁴ After questioning our informants, we feel certain it did not come from Oxtotitlan, but from a cave southwest of Chilapa.



Fig. 32 Pre-Hispanic textile fragment. Red and white brocade design. Size approximately 20 centimeters in length.

Quiatepec, which lies between the cave and the village of Acatlan, is the area nearest the cave with any significant concentration of sherds. In a reconnaissance of this area, a few diagnostic Pre-Classic sherds were found, none of which exhibited Olmec traits.³⁵

Two private collections of Pre-Hispanic ceramics from sites in the Chilapa area were seen during our investigation. In addition to local pottery styles, there were several examples of "Tenochtitlan Black-on-Orange" (Aztec III) sherds, Teotihuacan cylindrical

³⁵ One white rim sherd, with an incised double-line-break was found. This stylistic attribute does not appear in Pre-Classic pottery in central Mexico until about 900 B.C. (Tolstoy: personal communication).

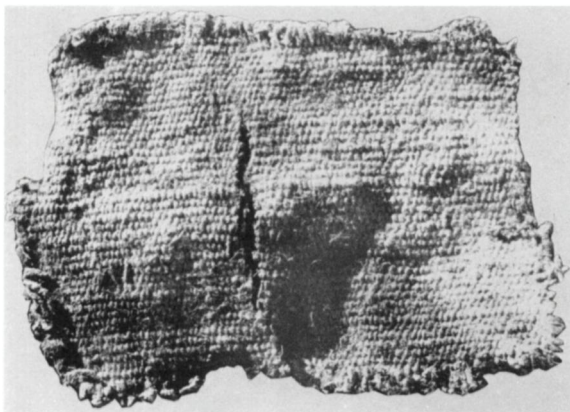


Fig. 33 Textile fragment, undecorated.

tripod vessels, and figurines in Aztec and Mazapan (Toltec) styles. In addition, one collection contained a Monte Alban III greyware bat head. Pre-Classic figurines included several varieties common in Morelos and the Valley of Mexico, such as D-2 and a type similar to the Xalostoc variety of K figurines. Also abundant in these collections were the so-called "San Jerónimo" figurines, typical of Pre-Classic coastal Guerrero.

The great diversity of ceramic types mirrors the complex and varied prehistory of the Chilapa region. Cultural influences in this area appear to have entered from the Valley of Mexico, Morelos, Oaxaca, and areas of Guerrero to the south and west.

THE JUXTLAHUACA PAINTINGS

THE PAINTINGS of Juxtlahuaca cave, which have been well described by Carlo Gay (1967), are the only other definite Olmec paintings known at the moment. Because of their proximity to the Oxtotitlan murals, I will briefly discuss and compare the paintings of the two caves. The Juxtlahuaca paintings probably fall within the same general time period as those of Oxtotitlan. However, they do not appear to have been painted by the same artists or to have the same iconographic themes. While the murals of Ox-

totitlan occur near the mouth of the cave, the Juxtlahuaca paintings occur nearly 1200 meters deep within the cave. There are three major paintings in the Juxtlahuaca cave, plus several minor ones.

The main mural, which Gay designates as Painting 1 (Fig. 34), depicts two human figures, one large standing figure and a much smaller seated one. The large standing figure, in polychrome, is outlined in black. He is shown wearing a headdress with a projecting feather plume which is held in a notched rectangular element. He wears a polychrome *huipilli*, which is slit at least partially up one side, for his right leg projects somewhat from this garment. He has on



Fig. 34 Juxtlahuaca Painting 1. Standing figure in center, seated figure in lower left corner.

what appears to be a jaguar-skin cloak and jaguar-skin coverings on his arms and legs. In his right hand he holds a red trident-like object. Gay (1967: 32) feels the figure is bearded, although today the facial features are virtually indistinguishable because visitors to this cave have rubbed their hands over them. The smaller, seated figure faces the standing figure. A rope-like object passes between them, and is held in the left hand of the standing figure. The seated person appears not only to be bearded but also to be wearing a black mask over his entire face. Behind this scene, on a nearby stalactite, is a glyphic motif which Gay (1967: 33) suggests represents a "building." However, similar glyphic motifs occur at Oxtotitlan (e.g., Paintings 4 and 6), and such an identification is extremely tenuous.

Painting 2 in Juxtlahuaca cave (Fig. 35) represents a large serpent with a red body and an elaborate black head. The serpent's eye contains the St. Andrew's cross motif, and is surmounted by an elaborate plumed or flame eyebrow. The crude red painting of the body area, which obscures part of the face, suggests that the body may have been repainted sometime after the original painting was completed. Coe

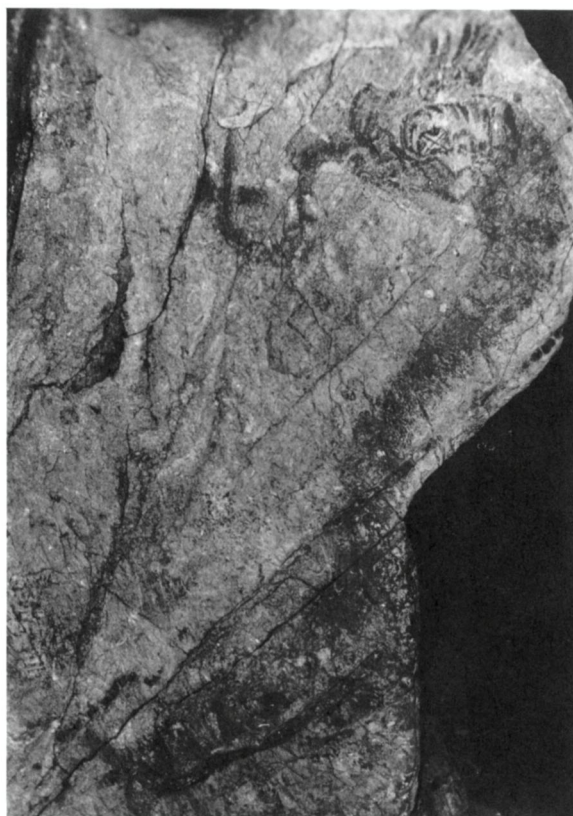


Fig. 35 Juxtlahuaca Painting 2. Serpent.



Fig. 36 Juxtlahuaca Painting 3.
An animal, probably a jaguar.

(1968a: 100) identifies this as a feathered serpent; Gay (1967: 34) as a "plumed" serpent.

Painting 3 (Fig. 36) shows an animal, probably a jaguar, which faces the serpent of Painting 2. The body is red, with a spotted back, and the whole is outlined in black. The spots do not resemble flowers as they do at Oxtotitlan (Mural 2; Painting 1-d), and the features of the animal are generally unlike the jaguar representations at Oxtotitlan and Chalcatzingo. Both Gay (1967: 34) and Coe (1968a: 100) feel that this animal may only be "disguised" as a jaguar. The outlining of Painting 3, as well as of Painting 1, is also in contrast to Oxtotitlan, although there is a possibility that the Mural 2 jaguar at Oxtotitlan is partly outlined.

INTERPRETATION

ON THE BASIS of its motifs and their similarities to Chalcatzingo carvings with more certain iconographic meanings, Mural 1 at Oxtotitlan appears to be primarily related to concepts of rain, water, and fertility. The human figure seated upon the jaguar-monster head most likely represents a person connected with these concepts. It is probable that Oxtotitlan functioned as a shrine to water and fertility. The rain-god face in the south grotto (Painting A-3) strengthens this hypothesis. At the time of the conquest, caves were associated with the concept of "Tlalocan," the cave abode of the rain god and his helpers; this belief persists in many remote areas of Mexico today. Aged informants in Acatlan told us that in times past the cave contained lagoons of water during the rainy season; on occasion this water would overflow the mouth of the cave and cascade into the fields below. Such a phenomenon would certainly have merited Oxtotitlan a reputation as a mystical source of water. Current nomenclature suggests that this region has maintained its "sacred" characteristics as a place important to rain, at least into the Aztec period. A small hill, today called the Cerro Quiatepec, lies between the cave and Acatlan. The word "Quiatepec" in Nahuatl signifies "the hill of rain." In contrast to Oxtotitlan, the theme of water and fertility does not appear to be present in

the Juxtlahuaca paintings. The difference in location between the Juxtlahuaca paintings, deep within the cave, and the Oxtotitlan paintings, on the cliff face and just inside the cave mouth, suggests a different function or theme for the paintings. Gay (1967: 31) mentions the canal excavated in the cave floor of Juxtlahuaca, and believes that it drained water from the caverns containing the paintings. Thus it would appear that water was not desired in this area of the cave.

The meaning of the Oxtotitlan paintings does not appear to be limited to water and agricultural fertility, however. As noted previously, on many stone altars at Gulf coast Olmec sites, human figures are seated in cave-like niches beneath jaguar-monster faces. Several of the figures carry were-jaguar babies; similar scenes are sometimes carved along the sides of the altar. These scenes may relate to mythical Olmec origins, connecting their ancestry with caves. It will be remembered that Post-Classic Nahuatl groups in central Mexico also traced their ancestral origins to caves. These altars may, however, be dedicatory monuments to various Olmec rulers, marking their reigns, in the same manner as certain Maya stelae were used (Proskouriakoff 1961). If one accepts certain altars as indicating mythological origins, this does not negate their possible dedicatory significance. Perhaps, as will be mentioned below, this is a significant part of the claim to rulership. That the altars contain motifs we today identify as "religious" does not necessarily indicate that the rulers were theocratic. It is often the case that completely secular rulers utilize religious means to verify their right to rule. These suggestions, which concern concepts somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, are made because the jaguar-monster in Mural 1 bears a close resemblance to those on Olmec altars. Thus it may relate to the same concepts and meanings signified by such altars. Below the jaguar-monster mouth on the altars are cave-like niches, while below the mouth of the jaguar-monster in Mural 1 is the actual cave of the south grotto. What we may have here is a complex interrelationship of ideas and concepts, dealing not only with rain and agricultural fertility, but, in addition, with mythical origins.

While we must remain cautious in correlating Post-Classic iconographic data with Pre-Classic art, certain similarities are tantalizing. The paintings of the north grotto are distinctive because, unlike the other paintings at Oxtotitlan, they are completely in black. In later Mesoamerican iconography, black is a color related to the underworld (and, of course, caves). Further, in Painting 1-d there is a sexual relationship between a jaguar and a human being, again quite probably involving a theme of mythical origins. In Mesoamerican belief, the jaguar is an animal of the underworld, and this association also suggests mythical origins connected with the underworld and caves. Coe (1965a: 14) has suggested that the Olmec were the "jaguar's children." However, since the jaguar is often a symbol of sovereignty, perhaps it is only the Olmec rulers who are the jaguar's children, born of an underworld union between man and jaguar. The stone altars perhaps confirm their rulership by showing them seated in the jaguar-monster cave mouth, the entrance to the underworld.

The iconographic meaning of the other paintings in the north grotto is unclear. A number of explanations could be postulated for Paintings 1-a and 1-e, the flowerlike motif and the owl, but none are completely satisfactory. Paintings 1-c and 3 seem to represent feathered serpents, although these paintings are different stylistically. They are possibly associated with rain, through an early concept of the rain serpent. Painting 3 may be an early date glyph; if this is true it may represent a 260-day divinitory calendrical date, rather than a dedicatory date. The ornate baby-face of Painting 7, with its serpent mask and scroll glyph, may relate to water. All of these identifications are quite tenuous.

Like all large-scale Olmec art in central Mexico, the Oxtotitlan paintings are closer in style to the art of La Venta than to that of San Lorenzo. Much of the art at San Lorenzo appears to be earlier than that at La Venta. Newly revised radiocarbon dates for La Venta place its time span at about 1000 to 600 B.C. (Berger, Graham, and Heizer 1967). Coe's stratigraphic data from San Lorenzo (which also has earlier

radiocarbon dates) show that Gulf coast contacts with other areas of Mexico, including the central highlands, begin in earnest about 1000 B.C. (San Lorenzo Phase B). However, his evidence indicates that jade and serpentine are not imported in quantity until around 900 B.C., during his Nacaste Phase³⁶ or its equivalent, La Venta II (Coe n.d.). Paul Tolstoy's new data from the Valley of Mexico indicates an Olmec presence there by about 1100 B.C. and a weakening of this influence there by 950 B.C. (Tolstoy and Paradis 1970: Fig. 1). The Oxtotitlan paintings, closely resembling La Venta art, probably date from the period between 1100–600 B.C. Moreover, since Nacaste-La Venta II phases show strong central Mexican influences, it is probable that the paintings fall within or near the period between 900 and 700 B.C., when there was reciprocal influence between central Mexico and the Gulf coast.

The dating above is based upon stylistic data from the polychrome murals and north grotto paintings. Dating of the south grotto paintings is problematical. It is difficult to assign them with confidence to any particular art style or culture period for they generally lack clearly definitive traits. Because the south grotto paintings are so different from the others at Oxtotitlan it is tempting to assign them to a completely different culture period. However, several other possibilities must be considered. It is possible that because two areas of the cave contain Olmec paintings, the paintings in the third area are also Olmec. The cliff murals are polychrome, while those of the north grotto are black. This suggests that the south grotto paintings may be different, not because they belong to a different culture period, but because there was a purposeful differentiation of paintings in each area of the cave. This differentiation would have had iconographic significance, such as the already-postulated relationship between the black paintings of the north grotto and the concept of an underworld.

Coe (personal communication) feels that south

³⁶ Coe's evidence comes mainly from correlating his data with La Venta data. He also points out that jade does not occur at San Lorenzo (Coe: personal communication).

grotto Painting A-1 ("El Diablo") with the "X" motifs is Olmec, and this identification does appear very possible. However, Painting A-3, the rain-god face, confuses this issue somewhat. Covarrubias (1946: Pl. 4; 1957: Fig. 22) presented an evolutionary scheme for the rain-god face, beginning with the Olmec were-jaguar, which is generally accepted today. According to this scheme, Painting A-3 would be too far evolved to be Olmec, and thus would be later than the north grotto and the polychrome paintings. In this case, the south grotto paintings would have to be considered as post-Olmec. However, if we accept the hypothesis that the red paintings of the south grotto are Olmec, then the primary stages of the Covarrubias scheme must be reconsidered, for a simple but typical "Tlaloc" face was in existence at that time.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

THERE ARE three main types of paintings at Oxtotitlan: polychrome, black, and simple red. These types occur generally in separate areas of the cave and therefore each possibly has its own iconographic significance. Two themes appear to be identifiable in the paintings, water (agricultural fertility) and mythical origins. In contrast, the Juxtlahuaca paintings do not clearly relate to either of the Oxtotitlan themes, although they are probably closely contemporaneous, with a suggested date of between 900 and 700 B.C. As our knowledge of Olmec chronology in Mexico's central highlands improves, this date may have to be revised.

While some scholars have suggested Guerrero as the origin point of Olmec culture, all of the recent archaeological data points to an earlier Gulf coast homeland. Olmec art in the highlands is not incipient, but well developed and sophisticated, showing its derivation from the contemporary Olmec styles from La Venta.

It is important to consider why these paintings occur in Guerrero, so far from the Olmec heartland. I previously noted (Grove 1968b: 182-3) that an apparent patterning exists for highland Olmec sites, which suggests that they are located along major

trade routes running between the central highlands, Guerrero, and the Gulf coast. In other words, the spread of the Olmec style appears related in some degree to their quest for natural resources unavailable in their tropical homeland. Coe (1965a: 123) has suggested that this trade was in the nature of a "jade route" based primarily upon various stones considered valuable by the Olmec. Guerrero, with its complex metamorphic geology and rich mineral wealth, appears to be a likely candidate for the as yet undiscovered sources of Olmec jade and jadeite. In addition, cotton, cacao, and other plant products could have been sent to the Gulf coast from Morelos and Guerrero.

Trade routes would of necessity have occurred along the paths of best access into these regions, and in mountainous central Mexico this generally means along river valleys. The major route between the central highlands and Guerrero appears to have been the Río Cuautla-Amacuzac, which begins in Morelos and runs southward into Guerrero and the Río Balsas (Fig. 1). The valley of the Río Atentli is geographically located so as to present a southward extension of the Cuautla-Amacuzac valley system, and may have served as a continuing route southward to the drainage system of the Río Papagayo and the Pacific coast of Guerrero. This route would pass directly by Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca.

The fact that cave shrines such as those discussed in this report exist in this region indicates that Olmec contact was not of a temporary nature. It may have taken the form of actual colonization, although over the years the colonies may have gradually acculturated to a more "localized" way of life. While some of the Oxtotitlan art appears related to water-fertility, etc., other paintings having to do with mythical origins may be related to symbols of sovereignty. These representations could serve to validate the rulership of a colonial Olmec elite, or the rulership of a local elite which has adopted, through close interaction with the Olmec, Olmec status symbols (e.g., Flannery 1968: 105). An apparent localization of ceramic styles begins about 950 B.C., when highland contacts with

the Gulf coast appear most obvious,³⁷ and, at the same time, some forms of Olmec art continue in the highlands.

All of the present data indicate that Guerrero has had a rich and varied culture history. They also indicate

³⁷ Grove 1968b: 183. I feel that this may have been connected with the destruction of San Lorenzo and the shift in power to La Venta.

the great need for future work on the problems in reconstructing Olmec culture and prehistory. Many of our hypotheses will of course be revised or rejected as new data become available against which to test them. The Olmec paintings discussed above are probably not unique; many more are rumored to exist. Their discovery will also contribute to the difficult task of interpreting the prehistory of Guerrero and the widespread culture of the Olmec.

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